

ICAN FILMS PRESENTS
A FILM FOR THE ADULT FAMILY

Seven Dumpsters and a Corpse

BY THOMAS HAEMMERLI

Thomas Haemmerli is about to celebrate his fortieth birthday when he learns of his mother's death. A further shock follows when he and his brother Erik discover her apartment, which is filthy and full to bursting with junk. It takes the brothers an entire month to clean out the place. Among the chaos, they find films going back to the 1930s, photos and other memorabilia. Gradually they piece together a strange and unique family saga, in which baronesses and counts, Latin Lovers and Nazi officers play a role, and even the young Kofi Annan makes an appearance. A fast-paced and surprisingly funny story about an unusual legacy.

Protagonists

Thomas Haemmerli, Director

Born in 1964, Thomas Haemmerli studied philosophy and law before starting a career as a TV and print journalist. He is a columnist, book author, political activist and a communications mercenary.

SEVEN DUMPSTERS AND A CORPSE is Thomas Haemmerli's first feature documentary.

Filmography:

Various short films for Swiss and German Television – 2006-1995

Including:

“Dokumentarfilme – eine Anleitung” – “Documentaries – a Manual” – 1995

“Fuck Helmut Lang” - 1995

Erik Haemmerli, Brother

Born 1967, restaurateur, married, one daughter

2005	opens the Restaurant Bederhof, Zurich
1994-2005	various posts, including manager, in the restaurant business in Switzerland and Germany
1996-1999	owner of the catering company Schlemmerservice, Zurich
1990-1994	attends hotel school in Lucerne, earns a degree in gastronomy (HF/SHL)
1989/90	language courses in England and France
1984–89	apprenticeships as waiter and cook in various Zurich restaurants

Brünhilde Haemmerli, Mother

Born in Cologne in 1933. Her father is a patent attorney and her mother a descendant of Austrian nobility – although many years later it emerges that her biological father was an Italian count. After the Second World War she is taken in by a foster family in Herrliberg, a suburb of Zurich. High school graduation in Zurich; in 1954 begins studying languages in Geneva. Studies languages in cosmopolitan Geneva and befriends international students including Kofi Annan. In 1963 she marries Jörg Häemmerli, a well-connected lawyer. Inviting Annan ("the Negro") to her wedding causes a sensation among the upper-class wedding guests.

Birth of her sons Thomas (1964) and Erik (1967). Enjoys a jet-set lifestyle, including Christmas at the St. Moritz Palace Hotel, ski vacations in Zermatt and a holiday home near St-Tropez. Divorces in 1973; thirty years of legal wrangling with her ex-husband will follow. Moves to a shabby suburb, buys a holiday home in Greece, smuggles stray cats and dogs from Greece and finds homes for them in Zurich. Moves to the Bergstrasse in Zurich's posh Zürichberg neighbourhood. Often in financial difficulties in spite of the generous alimony payments she receives. Extended travels around the globe. When she dies in March 2004, her car is already packed full for the next trip to Greece.

Director's Statement

By Thomas Haemmerli

I was preparing a big party for my fortieth birthday when I got the news of my mother's death. We hadn't been in close touch in recent years, and when I saw her apartment I was shocked. It was utter chaos. Because her corpse had been lying on the heated floor, the stench of putrefaction filled the air. During my very first visit to the apartment, I had already begun to use my camera. I am a journalist by profession and react automatically when I find anything unusual. This professional approach helped me maintain my distance.

My brother and I had suspected the apartment would be in disorder. But what we found exceeded our worst expectations. Like most "Messies" (see fact sheet below) my mother would do anything to make sure no one ever saw the inside of her home.

It took us an entire month to clean out the apartment, and we had to work our way through mountains of things. We unearthed a lot of documents about our family history, including photos going back to the 1880s, film footage from the 30s and 40s, and all the home movies my mother shot from the 1960s onward. This precious material – roughly seventy years of an unusual family history – became the first impulse for making a film. And the possibility of filming in the apartment, without interference from relatives.

My starting point was the unpleasant obligation of spending a month of my life cleaning out the squalid apartment. That is why the story is told from my point of view. While sorting through everything, I looked for clues to what might have gone wrong in my mother's life. And I limited myself to what we found in the apartment. Two opposing storylines developed out of this material. On the one hand, there is the struggle against chaos, during which the apartment becomes increasingly empty and clean. On the other hand, there is the story of our family, which becomes increasingly confusing.

I detest films conceived as therapy for their maker. I believe films should be made to tell a story, not as self-help for the filmmaker. Over time, our difficult experiences in the apartment and in Greece had generated a series of anecdotes which I enjoyed telling friends at dinner parties. I believe that these are the kinds of stories that should be shared with wider audiences.

That is one reason why the film uses humour. For me, humour, irony and ridicule are crucial in coming to terms with life's challenges. I can't function without humour, and that has shaped my film.

Stylistically the film also reflects the role played by my editor, Daniel Cherbuin. We have worked together for many years and share a predilection for fast, often intuitive story-telling as well as a conviction to never be boring. While we were editing Cherbuin encouraged me to tell the whole family story and not to sweep anything under the rug. Not only because honesty would make the film more interesting – but because I was convinced that radical openness is sometimes necessary when attempting to tackle the big topics such as death, the parent-child relationship, or the question of how we should live and what will remain after we are gone.

Producer's Statement

By Mirjam von Arx

Thomas Haemmerli always had his camera on him, back in 1994 when we first met as reporters for Swiss TV's newsmagazine "10 vor 10". Whenever a discussion, an image or a scene caught his interest, he would pull the camera out of his pocket. On March 8, 2004, when he received the ominous phone call from Zurich's criminal police department which launched one of the most harrowing weeks of his life, Haemmerli reacted the same way. He took out his camera and started shooting.

I still had vivid memories of his often experimental and sometimes idiosyncratic TV reports. During a brainstorming session to discuss potential joint projects in the summer of 2005, he happened to mention his mother's death – as well as the 30 hours of DV footage sitting unseen on his shelf since the nightmare of emptying her apartment had ended. The story affected me profoundly and has not let go of me ever since.

It is not the story itself which is unusual, but the fact that it has been documented: that Haemmerli continued shooting in situations where we would all prefer to keep our eyes closed – especially when our own family is concerned. As a result, he forces us to confront one of our society's last taboos: death.

Initially Haemmerli thought his footage could be turned into a short film – "which we might be able to show our friends." But it soon became clear that the film had the potential to interest wider audiences. The reaction from television broadcasters and film funds was almost universally positive: I had never been able to put together a film's financing so quickly. But what encouraged me the most were the personal reactions from our partners, co-producers and funders. After each pitch – and I made lots of pitches – there would be a long discussion which often turned into a revealing talk about personal experiences and private fears.

This long-lasting aftereffect is the most exceptional thing about the film, and its greatest accomplishment. Because the Haemmerli brothers were able to talk about what happened to them with honesty and humour, and without hypocrisy or inhibitions, they open up a space in which sensitive topics to do with home and family may be discussed.

Seven Dumpsters and a Corpse is a film which dares to tackle big questions – about life and death, the relationship between parents and children, and the danger of today's consumer society – without being sentimental or moralistic. Haemmerli steers clear of embarrassing pop-psychology exercises. Instead, he has succeeded in creating an intelligent, innovative and thought-provoking film for viewers prepared to confront life's biggest questions.

The Messie Syndrome

Who or what is a "messie"?

The word "messie" comes from "mess". Messies accumulate piles of papers and other objects in their homes, so that the space becomes nearly uninhabitable. This behaviour resembles addiction, and those affected often realize they are behaving irrationally. Objects are kept because they might come in handy some time, or because they are associated with memories which make it impossible to throw them away. Messies are often unable to allow visitors into their homes and as a result become increasingly isolated. Many messies hold on to the illusion of sorting through their piles and creating a well-organized archive.

What causes the Messie Syndrome?

One cause is the ever-increasing range of products available to consumers. In addition, the internet has intensified the flow of information. Advertising and marketing associate objects with emotions. The flood of goods and information forces consumers to constantly make choices. In this situation, messies find themselves overwhelmed.

Who runs the risk of becoming a messie?

The media response, the flood of self-help books on the topic, and the proliferation of self-help groups and cleaning services all confirm just how widespread the messie phenomenon is. Messies are found in all social classes and age groups. A large proportion of messies tend to be well-educated: wide-ranging interest and an affinity for archives may exacerbate the problem.

How was the phenomenon discovered?

The American author Sandra Felton, herself a messie, drew worldwide attention to the phenomenon with her self-help books. All her books were bestsellers, reflecting just how widespread the phenomenon is. In 1981 Felton coined the term "messie" and founded the first self-help group (www.messies.com). Today there are many such groups in a variety of countries.

How many messies are there?

Felton estimates that there are around 33 million messies in the USA, which would represent 12 percent of the population. In Germany the estimate is 1.8 million or roughly 2 percent of the population. However, these figures are only rough estimates. It is difficult to collect more precise figures, because most messies do not admit to being sufferers. What can be observed, however, is the growing number of self-help groups. In the city of Zurich alone there are four groups. In Germany there are over 200 regional groups.

Recommended reading

The Messies Manual, Messie No More, Living Organized, Smart Organizing, Organizing Your Home and Family, When You Live With A Messie. Organizing for Life: declutter your mind to declutter your world. All books by author Sandra Felton.

Credits

With:

Thomas Haemmerli, Journalist

Erik Haemmerli, brother, restaurant owner

Brünhilde Hortense Carola Gertraude Meurer von Infeld, mother

Jörg Haemmerli, Brünhilde's ex-husband and father of Thomas und Erik

Isolde Meurer von Infeld, Brünhilde's mother

The flat owner

Rentokil manager und technician

Mark Divo, Dada artist, squater

Ajana Cagular and Ariel Burt, artists

Production Credit List:

Directed by

Thomas Haemmerli

Produced by

Mirjam von Arx

Editing

Daniel Cherbuin

Camera

Thomas Haemmerli

Ariane Kessissoglou

Erik Haemmerli

Sound

Thomas Haemmerli

Ariane Kessissoglou

Original Score

Adrian Frutiger

Alexander T. Fähndrich

Sound Editing and Sound Design

Christian Beusch

Magnetix AG Zürich

Post Production Services

Treibhaus Post Production AG

Online / VFX

Michael Scialpi

Colorist

Roger "Somm" Sommer

Post Production Supervisor

Rocco Schult

Film Transfer Services
Swiss Effects

Film Print Supervisor
Ruedi Schick

Transfer
David Pfluger

Film Lab
Schwarz Film

Motion Graphics
Shamol Majumder

Title Design
Chris Eggli

Voice Recording
rohrbach.tv

Speech and Voice Coaching
Elke Schwarzstein / Clifford Lilley

Translation Services
Marcy Goldberg

Advertising
Thomas Campolongo

Production Assistants
Andreas Arnheiter
Diana Frei

Additional Footage
Bruna Haemmerli
Isolde Meurer von Infeld
Stini Arn

8mm Telecine
AVP München
Localfilm Stettlen

«Leerer, inhaltsloser Ausdruck»
Music/Lyrics: Saalschutz
Performed by Saalschutz feat. Stina Galaxina
From the Album Saalschutz "Das ist nicht mein Problem"
CD: ZickZack ZZ2005 LC 09283 / LP: Desert Engine DE009
Courtesy of What's So Funny About.GmbH and Desert Engine Records

"ech well frei si"
Music/Lyrics: Crazy
Performed by Crazy
From the Album Crazy (1980)
Bezug: www.mital-u.ch

Music/Lyrics: TNT
Performed by: TNT
From the Sampler: Definitiv. Zürich 1976 bsi 1986
Bezug: www.recrec.ch

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